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WASHINGTON POST
16 July 1985

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Toga and Dagger

Long, long before there was a CIA or a KGB there were the frumentarii of Rome, and before them an array of other spooks, assassins and covert actors.

Intelligence-gathering is as old as civilization. From the beginning, when men began to keep historical records, exploits of espionage have gone hand in hand with accounts of armies and the foreign policies of nations. Unfortunately, we sometimes act today as if the questions raised by such activities as spying and covert action were being raised for the first time. Our foreign policy—and our intelligence gathering—might profit from study of what has gone before.

Although the Bible has dozens of references to the use of spies to search out unknown lands or to infiltrate enemy camps, the first civilization that attempted political expansion on a large scale and had a bureaucracy well organized enough to handle an intelligence service was Egypt. The ancient Egyptians were experts in both military and diplomatic spying. Their "empire" extended as far as Syria, and they kept control over the minor kings farther north and east.

The Assyrians were the next people to develop an intelligence service. They added to the Egyptian system the physical installation that would make transmission of information much easier. They built a magnificent road system for their messengers and soldiers to travel on, kept it in good repair and put it under the protection of a special deity. News of revolution could be transmitted to the capital amazingly fast. An internal security system was also set up to ensure the loyalty and efficiency of all royal officials.

The Persians made other improvements on this system. The King's "eye" was the head of the royal intelligence service, and his network of "eyes and ears" kept watch on all local officials. Special commissioners toured the provinces making sure that the government machinery functioned properly.

These early eastern cultures represent a well-developed tradition of centrally organized intelligence gathering. They were developed under absolute monarchies and each built upon the developments of its predecessors. Rulers were concerned with their own survival in the face of domestic and foreign threats, and intelligence gathering and internal spying were the methods they used to control their subjects. They were never plagued with debates over the rights of individuals and were either unaware of or uninterested in the social and economic welfare of the general population.

The first exception to this pattern was Greece—a civilization noted for many things, but not for centralization. The fact that the Greeks were so impressed by the Persian system suggests that they had nothing to compare, and, indeed, it seems that although they admired the system, they did not copy it. That is not to say the Greeks were strangers to espionage. The Greek word

for spy, *skopos*, appears throughout classical literature from Homer to Polybius, and the existence of spies is well-attested in both literary and historical sources.

But intelligence failures stand out vividly in Greek history. At Aegospotami in 405 B.C., for example, the Athenian fleet, returning from an encounter with the Spartan enemy, failed to post a scout by its ships when it disembarked. A Spartan spy reported this and enabled the Spartans to destroy the entire Athenian fleet. The lack of a scout brought the Peloponnesian war to an end in a single night.

Counterintelligence, too, was well understood by the Greeks. They were very concerned with keeping information from leaking to the enemy. Alexander the Great censored his army's mail, and all generals knew that marching orders were to be given at the last moment, and then only to commanders. The instructions on what to do with enemy spies when they were caught is quite explicit—kill them. This rule was broken only when the spy could be used for propaganda purposes. When Xerxes caught a spy in his camp, he conducted him on a tour to display the obvious superiority of his own forces.

When Polybius, in a well-known passage, complained of the treachery and deceit of warfare in his own day, he must have been exaggerating, because although the Greeks never developed a central intelligence organization, spying had become a practiced art very early in Greek history both as a way of war and a way of life.

Finally we come to Rome, the Mediterranean power noted for its organizational ability and that eventually occupied most of the territories just discussed. We might imagine that the Romans would have learned from and copied the traditions of the East, but the truth is, they did not. Rome certainly needed an intelligence service; its early history is a series of continuous wars with neighboring tribes—the Etruscans, the Samnites and most dangerous of all, the Gauls. In all these encounters the Romans seem to have been caught singularly unprepared. The invasion of the Gauls in 90 B.C. for example, took them totally by surprise. Only the cackling of the geese in the city woke the Roman defenders in time to drive the Gauls down from the city walls. Livy tells us that on an occasion when the Etruscans were making a raid, the Romans learned about it only when the peasants came stampeding in from the fields to hide within the city walls. On another occasion, the city learned of a victorious battle when the waters of the Tiber brought the shields of fallen enemies inside the city walls. Whatever truth we may attribute to these stories (and it may be none), the fact remains that even in their myths, the Romans did not portray themselves as "all-knowing." Instead a picture emerges of the straightforward Roman peasant who looked with disdain on anything that appeared artificial or disingenuous.

The Romans rarely if ever placed special agents among allied tribes, but instead simply left it entirely to their allies to keep them informed of events that might endanger them both. This would work only as long as the ally thought it was in his best interest to keep Rome informed. When the tribe became hostile to Rome, the system simply collapsed. It seemed to run on *fides Romana*—Roman fidelity to its allies.

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